

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PARIS 05779 01 OF 02 262132Z

64

ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ARA-06 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02

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INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA

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AMEMBASSY BONN

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AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

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AMCONSUL LYON

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AMCONSUL NICE

AMCONSUL MARTINIQUE

AMCONSUL STRASBOURG

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E.O. 1L652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, FR

SUBJECT: FRENCH CANTONAL ELECTIONS APPROACH

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PAGE 02 PARIS 05779 01 OF 02 262132Z

REF: (A) PARIS 1222, (B) PARIS 05036

SUMMARY. CAMPAIGN HAS BEGUN FOR FRENCH CANTONAL ELECTIONS SCHEDULED FOR MARCH 7 AND 14. DEBATE SO FAR HAS BEEN DOMINATED BY QUESTION OF WHETHER THE ELECTIONS WILL HAVE NATIONAL POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. CURRENT PREDICTIONS ARE THAT LEFT WILL PICK UP A NUMBER OF CANTONAL SEATS WHICH MAY ALLOW IT TO CHALLENGE MAJORITY CONTROL OF SEVERAL DEPARTMENT-LEVEL GENERAL COUNCILS. IF ITS GAINS ARE PARTICULARLY IMPRESSIVE, THE LEFT MAY USE THEM TO ATTACK GISCARD GOVERNMENT AS "UNREPRESENTATIVE."
END SUMMARY.

1. CHIRAC OPENS THE CAMPAIGN: THE CANTONAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN TO SELECT REPRESENTATIVES TO DEPARTMENT-LEVEL GENERAL COUNCILS OFFICIALLY OPENED ON FEBRUARY 21. FOR MANY FRENCH, HOWEVER, ITS REAL BEGINNING CAME SEVERAL DAYS EARLIER, ON FEBRUARY 17, WHEN PRIME MINISTER JACQUES CHIRAC GAVE A WIDE-RANGING, 90-MINUTE TELEVISED INTERVIEW. AS PART OF RECENT MAJORITY EFFORTS TO ADOPT A MORE VISIBLE STANCE TO COUNTER THE WELTER OF PUBLICITY ACCORDED THE OPPOSITION DURING RECENT WEEKS (REFTEL B), CHIRAC WROTE OFF AS INCONSEQUENTIAL FRENCH COMMUNIST (PCF) EFFORTS TO CHANGE THEIR DOCTRINAL SPOTS. BUT HE SAVED HIS STRONGEST FIRE FOR SOCIALIST (PS) FIRST SECRETARY FRANCOIS MITTERRAND. CHARGING THAT MITTERRAND WAS "IRRESPONSIBLE" FOR HAVING ALIGNED HIS PARTY WITH THE PCF, CHIRAC PORTRAYED FRENCH SOCIALISTS AS "ISOLATED" FROM MAJORITY SOCIALIST THINKING IN EUROPE.

2. POLITICAL OR NON-POLITICAL? AFTER A PARTING SHOT AT PS ECONOMIC POLICIES, CHIRAC TURNED TO THE CANTONAL ELECTIONS TO REITERATE THE GOVERNMENT POSITION, FIRST ENUNCIATED BY PRESIDENT GISCARD IN OCTOBER 1975, THAT SUCH CONTESTS ARE "NON-POLITICAL" BECAUSE THEY INVOLVE ONLY LOCAL ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES. CHIRAC'S COMMENTS WERE OBVIOUSLY AIMED AT DEFLATING OPPOSITION CLAIMS THAT THE CANTONALS ARE POLITICAL AND, IN MITTERRAND'S WORDS, "WOULD PROVIDE AN ACCURATE POLL OF NATION-WIDE POPULAR OPINION." PCF SECRETARY GENERAL GEORGES MARCHAIS, AS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 PARIS 05779 01 OF 02 262132Z

WELL AS OTHER OPPOSITION LEADERS, HAS SAID MUCH THE SAME THING AND HAS PREDICTED THAT CANTONAL OUTCOMES WILL CONSTITUTE A REPUDIATION OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES.

3. NATURE OF THE BEAST: THE DISPUTE OVER THE POLITICAL OR NON-POLITICAL CONTENT OF THE CANTONALS STEMS IN LARGE MEASURE FROM THE NATURE OF THE CONTESTS. HELD EVERY THREE YEARS ON THE BASIS OF A TWO-ROUND POPULAR VOTE, THE

ELECTIONS DETERMINE ONE-HALF OF THE 3529 CANTONAL REPRESENTATIVES WHO SERVE SIX-YEAR TERMS ON 99 DEPARTMENT-LEVEL GENERAL COUNCILS. GENERAL COUNCILLORS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR REPRESENTING CANTONAL INTERESTS VIS-A-VIS THE DEPARTMENT AT BUDGET TIME. SUCH INTERESTS ARE ALMOST ENTIRELY LOCAL IN NATURE, INVOLVING DEPARTMENTAL ROADS, COMMUNITY CENTERS, DAY-CARE CENTERS AND THE LIKE. THUS THE MAJORITY HAS A POINT WHEN IT DESCRIBES CANTONAL ELECTIONS AS NON-POLITICAL, AT LEAST IN TERMS OF NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS. ITS CONTENTION IS ALSO PROBABLY ACCURATE AS REGARDS THE NUMEROUS SPARSELY POPULATED CANTONS WHERE LOCAL REPUTATIONS OFTEN PLAY A GREATER ROLE THAN PARTY AFFILIATIONS. ALSO INDIRECTLY BOLTERING THE MAJORITY'S ARGUMENT IS THE RELATIVE LACK OF VOTER INTEREST. COM-

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PAGE 01 PARIS 05779 02 OF 02 262141Z

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PARED TO THE 85 PERCENT TURN-OUT FOR THE 1974 PRESIDEN-
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PAGE 02 PARIS 05779 02 OF 02 262141Z

TIAL CONTEST, THE 1973 CANTONAL ELECTIONS DREW ONLY 54
PERCENT OF ELIGIBLE VOTERS.

4. NEVERTHELESS, THE OPPOSITION CAN POINT TO OTHER
FACTORS TO BACK ITS CLAIM THAT THE ELECTIONS HAVE NATION-
POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE. CANTONAL RESULTS WILL
EVENTUALLY BE REFLECTED AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL IN THE
COMPOSITION OF THE SENATE, WHICH IS LARGELY ELECTED BY
GENERAL COUNCILS. IN ADDITION, GENERAL COUNCILS PLAY A
SIMILAR ROLE IN SELECTING REPRESENTATIVES TO FRANCE'S
26 REGIONAL COUNCILS. AND FINALLY, A CONSIDERABLE NUM-
BER OF CANTONS BOAST ELECTORATES OF 50,000 OR MORE WHERE
PARTY LABELS AND NATIONAL ISSUES UNDOUBTEDLY AFFECT THE
OUTCOME.

5. SELECTIVE PERCEPTION: THE OBJECTIVE FACTS ASIDE,
BOTH THE MAJORITY AND OPPOSITION ARE CLEARLY ALLOWING
THEIR HOPES AND FEARS TO COLOR THEIR PERCEPTIONS. MAJOR-
ITY INSISTENCE ON THE NON-POLITICAL NATURE OF THE CON-
TESTS IS UNDOUBTEDLY BASED ON THE REALIZATION THAT IT IS
GOING TO LOSE A NUMBER OF CANTONAL SEATS. ONE REPORT
SUPPOSEDLY PREPARED IN THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR SEES
THE OPPOSITION GAINING AT LEAST 40 SEATS NATION-WIDE.
THE OPPOSITION ITSELF IS PREDICTING EVEN GREATER GAINS
(60-80) AND HAS SET ITS SIGHTS ON SEVERAL DEPARTMENTS
WHERE CANTONAL DEFEATS COULD PROVE HIGHLY EMBARRASSING
TO THE GOVERNMENT.

6. KEY RACES: THE CORREZE DEPARTMENT IN SOUTH CENTRAL
FRANCE IS ONE OF THE MORE STRIKING EXAMPLES. PRIME
MINISTER CHIRAC IS THE CURRENT PRESIDENT OF THE DEPART-
MENT GENERAL COUNCIL, BUT A TWO-SEAT SHIFT WOULD GIVE

THE PRESIDENCY TO THE LEFT. ANOTHER IS PUY-DE-DOME, THE DEPARTMENT FROM WHICH GISCARD RAN FOR THE PRESIDENCY IN 1974. THERE THE MAJORITY'S MARGIN IS ONLY ONE SEAT. FIVE OTHER DEPARTMENTS EXHIBIT SIMILARLY SLIM PRO-MAJORITY MARGINS. ATTENTION IS ALSO FOCUSED ON THE VAL-DE-MARNE DEPARTMENT NEAR PARIS, WHICH THE OPPOSITION IS TRYING TO USE AS AN EXAMPLE OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO SKEW THE RESULTS THROUGH GERRYMANDERING.

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PAGE 03 PARIS 05779 02 OF 02 262141Z

7. CONCLUSIONS: DESPITE THE GOVERNMENT'S BEST EFFORTS, IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT, WHETHER WARRANTED OR NOT, CANTONAL ELECTION RESULTS ARE GOING TO BE CLOSELY EXAMINED FOR NATIONAL POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS. THIS WOULD BE THE CASE IF ONLY FOR THE FACT THAT THEY INVOLVE SOME EIGHT OR NINE MILLION VOTERS AND ARE THE FIRST MAJOR ELECTIONS OF ANY SORT SINCE THE 1974 PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST. MOREOVER, WITH FIFTEEN CABINET MEMBERS AND NEARLY 200 DEPUTIES AND SENATORS DEFENDING THEIR GENERAL COUNCIL SEATS, PUNDITS WILL ENJOY AMPLE OPPORTUNITY TO LACE THEIR ANALYSES WITH "NATIONAL" POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS.

8. IT ALSO SEEMS CLEAR THAT THE OPPOSITION WILL COME OUT THE OVERALL WINNER IN TERMS OF SEATS GAINED. CURRENT POLLS INDICATING RECENT NATION-WIDE GAINS FOR THE OPPOSITION ASIDE, THE LEFT OF 1976 IS OBVIOUSLY MUCH MORE VIGOROUS THAN THE DIVIDED FORMATIONS WHICH THE MAJORITY FACED IN 1970, THE LAST TIME THIS YEAR'S CANTONS WERE CONTESTED. INITIAL PREDICTIONS SEE THE COMMUNISTS AS THE BIG WINNERS AND THE SOCIALISTS ALSO RACKING UP SIGNIFICANT GAINS.

9. IF OPPOSITION INROADS SHOULD PROVE PARTICULARLY IMPRESSIVE, THE LEFT MAY USE THE FIGURES TO MOUNT A PUBLIC CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE CURRENT NATIONAL MAJORITY AS "UNREPRESENTATIVE" OF ACTUAL FRENCH POLITICAL OPINION. MITTERRAND HAS ALREADY CLAIMED THAT THE PRESENT "SOCIOLOGICAL" MAJORITY IS AT VARIANCE WITH THE MAJORITY IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. A LOPSIDED OUTCOME IN THE CANTONS WOULD PROVIDE FURTHER AMMUNITION, AND SOME OBSERVERS ARE GOING SO FAR AS TO PREDICT THAT THE LEFT MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO BUILD SUCH A CAMPAIGN AROUND A CALL FOR NEW LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS TO "RIGHT THE BALANCE."
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